

The Choctaw Truth Oath

By Lucia Loomis

AT four o'clock on this same afternoon Lewis James had finished bidding farewell to the beloved faces and scenes over which his heart yearned and was riding over the same road where afterward his father and sweetheart rushed so madly. All that day he had been saying his unspoken good-byes; to the little nooks where he had played when a child; to the old trees where his young body had clambered; to the rocky hillsides where his feet had climbed. He had fondled each hound and patted each pony; he had watched his father and mother and little brothers and sisters, with wistful eyes, but had been careful to say no word which might arouse their suspicion. Several times in his wanderings from early morning to mid-afternoon his feet had strayed unconsciously in the direction of Minnie Folsom's house and the mossy spring, but he had wrenched himself in other paths because he knew that to see Minnie would be futile and would make everything harder. He had not had one glimpse of her since that eventful night when his jealous senses had told him that she was crying in the arms of John Cohee. Of her later presence in the old oak, he had not guessed. Neither had he seen John Cohee, and he had put the man out of his mind. John Cohee was probably far away and safe from the gun of the executioner. Having lived always in the open, and been nursed under the shelter of the wooded places, his mind was free from all pettiness, and the thing which he was about to do did not seem great to him. He was merely doing a good turn for one he loved, and his religion embraced instinctively much of the mythology of his forefathers; the thought of death was not fearful to him. For to the Indians of long ago death was but a beautiful transformation and they did not dread it either for their bodies or souls. Lewis James knew that after the guns had done their work with him that he would but be started on his journey to a land fairer far than his dear Choctaw country; that the Christian God, to whom he now prayed, would place for him there all the woodland things which he so loved, and keep him free and happy there forever more.

And so when four o'clock came he found himself riding calmly on his little pony toward the place where his young heart would cease to beat. He ambled through the woods taking a last look at their beauties and breathing in the scent of the flowers and the spicy odors of the grass as if he were drinking rich wine. The birds kept up a continual funeral dirge for him, but it was so happy and joyous and wildly melodious that it took on the tune of a triumphal march. Without knowing it, the thing which he was to do that day gave him the feeling of a young god going forward to sacrifice, and not the agony of a human being facing annihilation. He tasted of the joy of great giving so that even death was sweet.

When he came within a mile of the council house he slipped into a green alcove off the roadside and dismounted. Throwing the bridle over his pony's neck he turned her loose in the woods, knowing that before the night was far spent she would be in front of his father's barn. Then he struck off through the woods, so as to avoid the town and wait for the hour of his execution at some secluded place nearby. His eyes searched for the largest and greenest of the leaves, and finding one to his satisfaction, he pulled it off and pinned it securely against his gray shirt just over the heart, so that it could be seen plainly a hundred yards away. Wearing this emblem, he walked leisurely toward the place which he had selected in his fancy to wait for the sunset. It was a little knoll, with its top free from any growth except that of grass and flowers, and its base encircled by trees which seemed to be playing "Ring Around the Rosy," so perfect a circle did they make. Only a few yards away was the spot where the soldiers were to stand, with their guns, but the foliage hid it from sight. From the top of the knoll where he had stretched himself to wait he could see the smoke from the chimneys of the town and the roof of the council house rising above the rest of the buildings and out-



"PIN THE GREEN LEAF HERE."

lined against the evening sky. Even the noises from there reached his ears faintly. The sound of a hammer pierced the still air. It kept punctuating the silence until it penetrated the brain of the boy, and a little shudder passed through his body when he came to realize that it was his coffin which was being made just over there—the coffin where his warm, vigorous young limbs were soon to be laid in cold repose. In order not to think of the hammerings, he turned his thoughts to the people of his tribe—the Choctaws—those whom his father so loved, and into his heart there crept a feeling of patriotism and affection which he had never felt for them before. They were his people and his tribe, and he was suddenly glad to die for them. A warmth of fervor swept his body such as he had never before experienced.

Into the tenor of his musing, there came at last the sound of footsteps—somebody passing through the woods on their way to the scene of the death, perhaps. The hour was drawing closer. It was but thirty minutes before he must present himself at the council house to begin the journey back with the soldiers and their guns. The steps came nearer, twigs snapped under a man's tread, and before he could spring to his feet there came into the open space the Indian youth, John Cohee. For a long minute the two men stared at each other, the condemned man and the savior, and the look in the eyes of each was one of great surprise.

John Cohee made a stride forward and held out his hand to Lewis James, saying:

"I wondered if you would do it. Lewis James, you are a great man and an honor to the tribe of the Choctaws. Here I give you my hand in token of a friendship which I have never before felt for you. The John Cohee whom you knew has gone away, never to return, because the gun of the executioner will not allow him to do so. It is true that I was a coward; I did not fear the death so much as I hated to give up the free, the beautiful life. I meant to ride far away, to go to the

ends of the earth, if needs be to escape, and then it came to me that I, as well as you were a Choctaw, and so I have come today to die as a Choctaw has been taught to die. I am a horsethief, but I am a Choctaw as well, and a Choctaw does not go back on his truth oath. So that you may tell the tale in after years to those men who feared and trembled for my honor, I wish you to go with me and stand at my side as I die. I wish that you should be able to tell your children and your grandchildren, that a horsethief may still keep his word, and that even the son of a dog may be a Choctaw still."

At the end of this most surprising speech, Lewis James grasped the extended hand of John Cohee, and a feeling of admiration for the other made him suddenly glad. It was not until a few moments later that the great thought came to him—the thought that he himself was free, free to go back to the home he loved, free to roam over his fertile land, free to win the love of Minnie Folsom.

With the staccato notes of the hammer pulsing in his ears, he put his two hands upon the shoulders of John Cohee and looking into his eyes, he said:

"I will go with you, John Cohee. And in the years that your spirit roams in the shadowy land, you can listen, and you will hear me tell to all how John Cohee, who was counted as a coward, proved the bravest of all Choctaws, because he conquered himself and his desire, and because when the moment came he could not go back upon the oath which his lips had spoken. I will tell it to the children of the tribe so that they may weave the story into songs. The mothers rocking their little ones will lull them to sleep with the tales of John Cohee, the Great Choctaw, because I, myself, will never let them forget. The old men of today will be proud that they have known you, and the maidens whom you have looked on tenderly will shed tears for you—"

And as he said these words the pathetic face of little Minnie came before his eyes, and for a moment his own wavered as he looked into the face of the man whom Minnie loved, and whom he was going to see shot to death. But only for a moment. For to an Indian love is a secondary matter after all, and his honor the greatest thing in the world. Therefore to James, the fact that John Cohee should die like a man was the vital thing, even if the heart of little Minnie should break of woe.

Into the eyes of John Cohee, the horsethief, there crept a look of great shame.

"Ah," he said, "the maidens. I have loved many of them, so many indeed that I cannot regret one. To little Minnie I wish you would say that I was not worthy of a tear from her eyes. The maidens, there were indeed many of them, and they were all fair. But," he jerked out the words suddenly, and the introspective mood seemed to have left him. "Let us go. The sun is nearly set. The hour draws nigh. Pin the green leaf here," and pointing to his own heart, he plucked the leaf which had already been pinned on the bosom of Lewis James, and held it to his breast while the other fastened it securely in place.

Then they gave each other a firm handclasp, and without a backward glance walked out of the little circle of trees and struck into the path which terminated at the council house. John Cohee led the way with his head erect, and Lewis James followed in silence.

The little town was very busy that day, and numbers of people were walking back and forth over the firmly packed earth of the sidewalks, although but a few of them were interested in the coming execution. Although the sun was so near the horizon, it was hot in the little hollow where the town nestled, and the only cool place was the great green about the towering council house, which frowned down upon the entire valley. Little groups of men stood talking together under the ancient elms on its lawn, and others went incessantly back and forth into its great front door. When John Cohee and Lewis James came to the street

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